DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 284 PS 021 705

AUTHOR Hirsch, E. D., Jr.
TITLE Toward a Centrist Curriculum: Two Kinds of Multiculturalism in Elementary School.
INSTITUTION Core Knowledge Foundation, Charlottesville, VA.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; *Core Curriculum; Course Content; *Cultural Pluralism; Curriculum Development; Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; *Ethnocentrism; High Risk Students; *Multicultural Education
IDENTIFIERS *Core Knowledge Foundation

ABSTRACT

American elementary school children need a common core curriculum so that they can share common points of references that will enable further learning; multiculturalism must be a part of this curriculum. But two types of multiculturalism exist: one that is universalistic in viewpoint, which might be called cosmopolitanism, and another that is particularistic in viewpoint and stresses loyalty to one's local culture, which could be called ethnic loyalism. An ethnic loyalist holds that each culture has a duty to preserve its own identity against the larger cosmopolis, whereas the cosmopolitan feels he or she is part of a larger cultural framework. It will do black American children little good, for example, to learn a lot about their African and African-American past if they still cannot read and write effectively, do not understand natural science, and cannot solve basic mathematical problems. The only kind of multiculturalism that can overcome these deficiencies is the kind that invites all children to become active, effective members of the larger cosmopolis. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 362 284

Core Knowledge
Excellence and Fairness in Early Education

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Patricia W. Emlet
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Toward a Centrist Curriculum:

Two Kinds of Multiculturalism in Elementary School

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

I. Two Kinds of Multiculturalism

What are people of good will to think about the disputed topic of multiculturalism in elementary school? Most of us would agree that children in early grades should begin to acquire respect for each other. And we would probably agree that respect can in part be fostered by a curriculum that includes the study of diverse peoples and cultures.

We should also agree that, whatever the curriculum, children need to have basic foundations and share common points of reference that will enable further learning. Even if the teaching of such shared knowledge should take up only 50% of classroom time--which is the curriculum reform advocated by the Core Knowledge Foundation--it would enormously facilitate classroom learning as well as social cohesion. Classroom learning cannot go forward effectively unless all students in the class share some common points of reference. A consensus is building in the United States that this shared, school-based knowledge should be (especially in the areas of history and literature) far more multicultural than it has been in the past. But multiculturalism comes in different guises. There's a progressive form that will be helpful to all students, and a retrogressive kind that not only tends to set group against group but also hinders the educational excellence and fairness it was conceived to enhance.

PS 021705

The schools of a modern nation are the chief institutions through which children become members of a wider national community. Schools are the only channel that cannot be switched to another station. Children will become adults who cooperate and sustain one another only if the school-based culture they gain makes them feel that they truly belong to the larger society. To create this sense of belonging for all groups has been the hope and promise of the United States in its best and most generous moments. As the great American writer Herman Melville said in 1849:

> There is something in the contemplation of the mode in which America has been settled that, in a noble breast, should forever extinguish the prejudices of

© 1992 Core Knowledge Foundation. Not to be copied or reproduced without permission from the Core Knowledge Foundation, 2012-B Morton Drive, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901.

national dislikes. Settled by the people of all nations, all nations may claim her for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world. ... We are not a narrow tribe of men -- No: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one.

I learned about that Melville passage from a distinguished advocate of multiculturalism, Henry Louis Gates. We happened to find ourselves on a panel on multiculturalism, and were in total agreement. Gates turned out to be one of the few scholars who had actually read my book Cultural Literacy and he had concluded that the book was an attempt to open doors rather than close them. He became a valued member of the Core Knowledge Network.

A few months later, it happened that Gates and I were invited to participate in an exciting event -- a telephonic conference at a university in South Africa, which took place not long after the release of Nelson Mandela. The subject of the conference was "South African Cultural Literacy after the End of Apartheid," and the idea was to get opposing viewpoints. Gates was on one phone in New York; I was on another in Charlottesville, and our remarks were being amplified over loudspeakers in South Africa, as we answered questions put to us by a panel there. No one except Gates and myself, who by now were friends and allies, knew what would happen. The South Africans of course assumed that we would take opposite sides on the multicultural question. They couldn't know that Gates was not only an advocate of the reforms I've been proposing for the past eight years, but also a member of our advisory committee on multiculturalism.

Shortly after that event, I had the good fortune of forming a friendship and an alliance with Dr. Neville Alexander, a black scholar who is leading the effort to amalgamate and standardize the various tribal languages of South Africa, and, in addition, to define the common multicultural core curriculum that all South Africans, black and white, will follow at school. He and other black leaders recognize that the schools of the new South African nation will have to teach a shared multiculturalism, so that each group will know something of the other through a core curriculum that is common to all. Alexander and his colleagues believe that only through teaching this centrist common core is there a chance for all citizens to attain equal economic opportunity and live in harmony.

What has drawn people like Neville Alexander, and Gates and me together on the subject of multiculturalism is an understanding that the term multiculturalism covers two quite distinct conceptions, and that only one of them is the right one from an ethical and political point of view. I want to focus my remarks on the distinctions between these two conceptions of multiculturalism.

On the surface, they have a lot in common. Both seem to advocate pluralism, express admiration for diversity, and have a broad sympathy for the values to be found in all cultures. But in their philosophical and practical implications the two conceptions are polar opposites.

One version is the universalistic view of Melville, which might be called "cosmopolitanism." The other is a particularistic vision that stresses loyalty to one's local culture. It could be called ethnocentrism, but one can also use the less pejorative term "ethnic loyalism."

For an ethnic loyalist, ethnicity defines the essence of a person. To be called a Korean-American or an African-American is to confer an essential definition of what that person is. But the advocate of cosmopolitanism takes a different view. Ethnicity is not one's essence, but an accident of history. Albert Shanker rightly observed, in defending the cosmopolitan view, that not all Jewish-Americans or Asian-Americans or African-Americans have the same attitudes and values. While ethnicity may be an important defining part of an individual's identity, it is a presumption to insist that ethnicity defines one more essentially than do dozens of other social and temperamental determinants.

So the issue about multiculturalism that we need to decide is this: Do we define ourselves as belonging to a particular "ethnos" or do we define ourselves as belonging to a broad "cosmopolis"? Cosmopolis, as you know, comes from the Greek roots "cosmos" meaning world and "polis" meaning city or nation. Cosmopolitanism means being a citizen of the world, a member of humanity as a whole. It is possible, of course, to hold a kind of dual citizenship, to be part of both one's particular ethnos and the larger cosmopolis. The difficulty begins only when one asserts the mutual exclusivity of ethnos and cosmopolis.

When Melville said of America "we are a world," he was not the first to conceive the idea of a world-polis. The concept had been current in late antiquity in the great city of Alexandria, which was in fact the first place to be called a cosmopolis. In Alexandria there were people from every race, nation, and continent rubbing up against each other to form a microcosm of the world, just as Melville conceived of America, and as many including myself still do. The ethnic loyalist, on the other hand, feels that accommodating oneself to a larger cosmopolitan culture means giving way to cultural imperialism, and a consequent loss of identity. This view ignores the universal historical fact that every ethnic culture existing today is an assimilated product of earlier cultural imperialisms. As one group or tribe fuses with another, a new ethnicity is always created. This pattern of cultural imperialism was as characteristic of the Iroquois as of the Zulus or the United States of America.

Those who are familiar with the Aeneid will know that the theme of lost ethnicity is as old as antiquity. Virgil's tragic sense of history, expressed in his famous phrase "lacrymae rerum," the tears of things, arose from the sense of loss when one culture is transmuted by a larger one. Like Richard Rodriguez in Hunger of Memory, which is a modern American version of this theme, Virgil saw very clearly that the benefits conferred by Roman civilization entailed the pain of some cultural loss. But even as Virgil dramatized the poignancy of loss, he also foreshadowed a cosmopolitan future in which all of these diverse groups would come to live in peace and prosperity instead of living as before in conflict, poverty, and danger.

An ethnic loyalist holds that each culture has a duty to preserve its own identity against the larger cosmopolis. The acknowledged pain of cultural loss makes this desire for preservation understandable. The difficulty, again, occurs when preservation becomes separation -- and there are any number of ethnic groups in the modern world that define themselves in sometimes violent opposition to other ethnic groups and to the cosmopolis. If we assert the right of all peoples to their own ethnicity, do we also sanction the ethnic intolerance that characterizes many cultures? If we argue that all people have a right to their own ethnicity, do we thereby approve of an ethnicity that is characterized by intolerance of other ethnic groups? Knowledge of one's ethnic heritage, or pride in the accomplishments of members of one's ethnic group may usefully bolster one's sense of self and self-esteem; but, clearly, the element of potential intolerance in ethnic self-identity must be sacrificed to the larger polis. In order to assert the right to ethnicity for all, we must all adopt the great Enlightenment principles of toleration and mutual respect.

II. Multiculturalism in the Schools

Let me leave intellectual history for to discuss the place of multiculturalism in education. The debates over multiculturalism need to be placed in the larger contexts of education and civil rights. Today the new frontier in the civil rights struggle is the attempt to overcome educational injustice. But that is a much more subtle and confusing struggle than sit-ins and freedom rides. It's a battle of experts and slogans where what seems benign may be malignant, and where it's hard to tell right from wrong, true from false.

People of good will on both the left and the right genuinely desire a good education for every child. Everyone is now saying that our national well-being hinges on educating all children to their potentials. Yet in the United States the academic gap between privileged and disadvantaged children grows ever wider as children move onward through early grades, whereas in other developed countries, the opposite occurs; the learning gap between haves and have-nots grows smaller as children advance in school. How do other countries offer their children more equal educational opportunities? Why is our educational system the least equitable in the developed world?

By unfairness I do not refer to the great inequality of spending on pupils in different schools. That is an external unfairness that should be addressed in the political arena as soon as possible. I mean a more subtle, internal unfairness that affects students who are attending the very same schools. Within the very same classroom some students are learning while others are not, because of differences that are social and economic rather than innate.

The chief reason for such internal unfairness in our schools is that we adults have failed to set clear knowledge-goals for each grade of elementary school. Our children now enter an educational system in which each classroom follows its own sequence of study. The very notion that our elementary schools even <u>have</u> a curriculum that can be defined in terms of specific knowledge is a myth. A typical principal cannot tell you what all students at a

grade level are learning in common. No teacher in our public schools can know with any certainty what specific knowledge incoming students have. Teachers must therefore engage in "review" for several weeks before going forward, and thereafter must constantly backtrack to fill in knowledge gaps that should not exist. This glacial slowness of academic progress in early grades immediately strikes foreign observers of our schools.

More than any other circumstance, this American vagueness about what children need to learn in each grade causes the learning gap to widen between haves and have nots. No teacher can bring a disadvantaged child's knowledge up to grade level, since no teacher can identify what that missing knowledge is. Advantaged children get needed background knowledge at home, but less fortunate children can only get such knowledge at school, and they do not. The thin broth of American elementary education creates unfairness both to disadvantaged students who become permanently handicapped, and also to informed students who become bored and alienated.

The obvious antidote to the thinness and incoherence of American early education is for us adults to reach agreement, as is done in other countries, on a core of content for each grade of elementary school. Let it be bluntly stated that unless we manage to reach such agreement, we cannot have a system of education that is both excellent and fair. The agreed-on core need not take up more than 50% of total classroom time, which would leave plenty of room for local variation. But even a 50% agreement would be exceedingly difficult to reach in the United States, as the heated arguments over multiculturalism attest.

The multicultural movement in the United States is at heart a demand for a redefinition of American school-based culture, in particular a demand to change the history and literature curriculum. This demand did not originate in our colleges and universities, where much of the debate about multiculturalism continues. It arose in the actual reconstitution of American society after the civil rights movement, and as a consequence of new waves of Asian and Latino immigration.

Those who have power in the present always determine what shall be selected and interpreted from the infinite past. There is simply too much past to burden students with endless history that is irrelevant to current realities. Events of recent years have redistributed power in the United States, and it is this change that lies behind the new multicultural redefinition of American history and literature. So long as Blacks and Asians and Latinos remained invisible in our present they also remained invisible in our past. But the present has changed, and henceforth so must the past. American history and literature are moving ever closer to Melville's vision.

That Melvillian, cosmopolitan approach to history and literature is the one we have adopted in the curriculum recently developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation. For the past five years, working with hundreds of experts, teachers and parents across the country, the Core Knowledge Foundation has been dedicated to developing a specific core curriculum for the early grades. We have consulted dozens of professionals of all sorts including experts

in subject matters and in multiculturalism. A provisional curriculum was debated and ratified by about one-hundred persons attending a national conference held in March 1990. The result of our consensus-building efforts is a very specific sequence of knowledge for grades 1-6, called the Core Knowledge Sequence. It is meant to constitute about 50% of a school's curriculum, thereby allowing for local variations, including integration with more ethnically-centered curricula. The Sequence is available for use by all schools and publishers. Currently, it is the only elementary curriculum having enough specificity to provide fully definite knowledge goals for each grade.

In order to be accepted, the Core Knowledge Sequence had to be ratified by persons of good will from many ethnic groups. Such people are a lot easier to find than publicized disputes suggest, and fortunately there are more centrists than there are extremists. Because people of good will from many ethnic groups participated in its formation, the curriculum is a consensus document that is multicultural in flavor. It contains, for example, historical concepts like "the griot" that are not found in most elementary curricula. (In West African oral cultures, the griot is the tale-teller and rememberer of traditions.) As any centrist curriculum must, it exhibits the following characteristics: 1) It encourages knowledge of and sympathy towards the diverse cultures of the world. 2) It fosters respect for every child's home culture as well as for the cosmopolitan school-based culture. 3) It gives all children competence in the current system of language and allusion that is dominant in the nation's economic and intellectual discourse.

This third requirement raises a question about including a strong element of the so-called "dominant" culture. Common sense and experience both dictate caution in trying to revolutionize American culture through the school curriculum by neglecting or even rejecting the currently dominant culture. That would simply harm children who are in most need of help. In order to get a good job a young person must be able to communicate in speech and writing in the standard language and allusion-system of the marketplace. Since this system of intellectual currency is in broad use by millions of adults, it is a highly stable system that is slow to change. Hence, in order not to penalize students, schools must include as part of the curriculum the system of language and allusion that is currently in place. This means that a cosmopolitan, centrist curriculum will initiate evolutionary rather than revolutionary change in American culture. Nonetheless, wherever there is an opportunity for fostering greater cosmopolitanism, it should be encouraged as insistently as is feasible without injuring any child's practical chances in life.

As earnestly as I welcome this movement toward a multicultural redefinition of American culture, I must quickly add that the issue of multicultural redefinition must not distract us from the issue of educational excellence and fairness in areas beyond the history and literature curriculum. For even after our schools have included many more elements of African, African-American, Native American, Asian, and Latino culture, we still face the task of giving all children a good education.

It will do black American children little good, for example, to learn a lot about their African and African-American past if they still cannot read and write effectively, do not understand natural science, and cannot solve basic mathematical problems. In the information age, such educational defects simply prolong victimization by keeping people in menial jobs, if there happen to be enough menial jobs to go around. The only kind of multiculturalism that can overcome this victimization is the kind that invites all children to become active, effective members of the larger cosmopolis. Every child should be able to read a serious book or training manual. Every child should be able to communicate with strangers in the larger society, give a talk to unknown fellow citizens, and to understand what is being said in such communications.

Cosmopolitanism is a true friend of diversity. It is the only valid multiculturalism for the modern era. Only a cosmopolitan, centrist core curriculum can enable all children to be well educated. The great ethnic diversity of America is not going to disappear just because we adults decide to empower children with a core of commonly shared knowledge -- a common school-based culture in addition to their home culture. If we Americans are to choose between the narrow ideal of ethnic loyalty and the broad ideal of social fairness, let us without hesitation choose fairness.